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Compulsory religion education and religious minorities in Turkey

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Chapter 1

Introduction

On 19th January 2007, Hrant Dink, a prominent and widely admired Armenian journalist and intellectual, was shot and killed outside his newspaper's office in Istanbul. Grief turned quickly to public anger, especially among young educated students who took part in the huge protests at Dink's funeral. A Turkish journalist of Armenian origin, Dink had worked strenuously to improve relations between Turks and Armenians. He was also one of the dozens of writers in Turkey to be charged under Article 301 of Turkey's penal code. He was charged with insulting Turkish identity often for his articles dealing with the killing of Kurds and Ottoman Armenians.¹

Although Dink's assassin was arrested immediately after the event, people who felt close to Dink and his ideas were not satisfied. Many believed that he was the victim of nationalist sentiments that had been created and promoted by the state in the first place. According to Rifat Bali, an independent Istanbul-based researcher who studies Turkey's minority communities, the message was clear. "The message of the murder is 'You shut up, know your limits as an Armenian or a non-Muslim and do not go public often and repeatedly, otherwise it will turn out bad for you.'"²

Less than three months prior to the murder of Hrant Dink, the same message was also in evidence when three Christian employees of a publishing house that distributes Bibles, were slain in the city center of Malatya.³ This religiously motivated event was in large part due to the provocation of local media which warned that Christianity and missionary activity were widespread in the city.

During the same period, another religiously motivated crime occurred when Catholic priest Andrea Santoro was assassinated in the Black Sea city of Trabzon. Don Andrea Santoro

¹ Article 301 of Turkish Penal Code that took effect on June 1, 2005 states the following:

A person who publicly denigrates Turkishness, the Republic or the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, shall be punishable by imprisonment of between six months and three years.

A person who publicly denigrates the Government of the Republic of Turkey, the judicial institutions of the State, the military or security organizations shall be punishable by imprisonment of between six months and two years.

In cases where denigration of Turkishness is committed by a Turkish citizen in another country the punishment shall be increased by one third.

Expressions of thought intended to criticize shall not constitute a crime.

In April 30,2008, the article was amended to change "Turkishness" into "the Turkish nation".

(Criminal Code of the Republic of Turkey. 5237. 26 Sept. 2004. Web. 12 Oct 2009.)

² "Bible publishers killed in Turkey." USA Today.com. Associated Press. 18 Apr. 2007. Web. 5 Sept. 2007.

³ Ibid.

was killed by two pistol shots as he was praying in St Mary's Church in Trabzon, where he had been parish priest for three years. The murderer was a sixteen year old who said that he committed this action "in the name of Allah".⁴

When religiously motivated crimes happen in Turkey, the response from the government is always the same. Prime ministers, politicians, government representatives condemn the events, and then emphasize that these are acts committed against the "future," "unity," and "the peaceful environment of Turkey". Politicians fail to question government policy, despite the fact that these murderers are raised in what they laud as the country's "peaceful environment", along with the similarly praised Turkish educational system.

As the history of Turkey and its relations with religious minorities reveal, minority rights are rooted outside the Kemalist social contract. Kemalist social contract refers to the 'Kemalist nationalism' that originated from social contract theories, especially from the principles advocated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Kemalist understanding of the social contract was strongly influenced by the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire that was considered to be caused by the failure of the Ottoman "*millet*" system and respectively by Ottomanism⁵. Kemalist nationalism, after experiencing the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, defined the social contract as its "highest ideal", one composed of national unity, national awareness and national culture. As argued by Smith, like that of all modern states hewn from traditional societies, Turkey's civic success has come at a cultural cost.⁶ From its inception, the machinery of the state has been dedicated to homogenizing a diverse populace at the expense of non-Muslims and non-Turkish communities. It is my contention that the intolerance that has been existent in Turkey towards non-Muslims and non-Sunni Muslims, stems from this latent social contract that has limited the religious and cultural diversity of Turkey.

The repercussions of this asymmetrical relation that the state had established with non-Muslims and Alevis, can also be revealed through looking at the Turkish educational arena; particularly through examining both the history of the religion education and the personal experiences of religious minorities about the course. This dissertation examines the history of the compulsory religion education (*zorunlu din eğitimi*) in the Turkish education system; with

⁴ "Trabzon'da rahip öldürüldü" ["Priest killed in Trabzon"]. *BBC News*. BBC. 6 Feb. 2006. Web. 6 Feb. 2006.

⁵ By the term *millet* I mean officially recognized organisations of the different non-Muslim religious groups, which mediated the relations of their members with the Ottoman state. To what extent these organisations formed part of the 'classical' Ottoman state system, and to what extent they were a 19th century innovation, still is a contentious matter among Ottomanists. See: Braude, Benjamin, and Bernard Lewis, eds. *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*. 2 vols. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982. In this paper I will use the term *millet* when dealing with the non-Muslim groups of the Ottoman period.

⁶ Thomas W. Smith, "Civic Nationalism and Ethnocultural Justice in Turkey." *Human Rights Quarterly* 27 (2005), p. 442.

particular attention paid to the experience of religious minorities (Jews, Orthodox Christians, Armenians and Alevis⁷), and to the principle of secularism in Turkish society.

What is meant by religion education is the existence of a religion course, a course just like others such as history, mathematics or literature offered in Turkish education system, that teaches basic tenets of Islam. I use the term 'religion education' advisedly, despite the fact that in English, the more usual term would be 'religious education'. First of all, the original Turkish name (*din eğitimi*) literally means religion education. Additionally, the term refers to the actual content of the course, rather than its methodological character. In other words, the intention was to introduce students to the basic tenets of Islam, but to do this within a system of state education that was secular, not religious. Indeed, by retaining the term religion education, and the original intentions behind it, we may more clearly identify the problems that ensued as the religion course shifted away from its original objective, and became more 'religious'/confessional in character.⁸

⁷ The Alevis of Turkey are an endogamous minority group whose identity has been historically defined in opposition to Sunni identity, stemming from the conflict between the Ottoman and the Safavid Empires in the sixteenth century. Alevism is a syncretic religion, which incorporates aspects of Shiite Islam with heterodox monotheistic traditions and pantheistic beliefs. (This definition is taken from David Zeidan. See: Zeidan, David. 'The Alevis of Turkey', *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol.3, No.4 (Dec. 1999)). In this dissertation, I refer to Alevis as a 'religious minority', although I acknowledge the fact that there is no consensus among Alevis or academic circles, as to whether Alevis should be regarded as a religious minority or not. In the EU Progress Reports, Alevis are also defined as a 'non-Sunni Muslim minority', a label to which some Alevis are opposed. The minority concept in Turkey is strongly informed by the Lausanne Treaty in which only non-Muslims were considered as minorities. Due to this narrow definition, and the negative connotations of 'minority' status in societal perception, groups like Alevis and Kurds who experience non-representation and repression in society may still refrain from calling themselves minorities. My choice stems from my understanding of 'minority group' as it is defined by sociologist Louis Wirth. He defines minority group as a group of people who because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from other citizens for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination. (See: Wirth, Louis. "The Problem of Minority Groups." *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*. Ed. Ralph Linton. New York: Columbia UP, 1945, p. 347) I would argue that this goes some way to describing the situation of the Alevis in Turkish society. I believe that in the end, what makes one group (the Alevis in this case), outsiders is not its minority status, but rather how minorities are perceived by the state and society. From this perspective, I see no problem in describing the Alevis as a religious minority.

⁸ In this education system, however, my interest is confined to the state and private schools; the primary schools and the high schools that prepare students for higher learning institutions. Thus, the examination of other types of schools, such as technical and vocational schools, which provide specialized instruction with the aim of training qualified personnel, is excluded. The reason for this is two-fold; first, the numbers of vocational and technical schools are relatively low compared to general primary and secondary schools (In 2008-2009 school year the number of primary and general high schools added up to 37,822 where as the number of vocational and technical schools were 4,622) and secondly, the members of the non-Muslim communities in these schools are almost non-existent (See: Turkey. Ministry of National Education Strategy Development Presidency. *National Education Statistics Formal Education, A Publication of Official Statistics Program 2008-2009*. Ankara: Devlet Basımevi, 2009, p. 7). Prior to 1997, primary education comprised five years of primary school (*İlkokul*) and three years of middle school, or junior high school (*Ortaokul*). After completion of the fifth year, the Primary School Diploma (*İlkokul Diploması*) was awarded, and the Middle School Diploma (*Ortaokul Diploması*) was awarded at the end of the three-year middle school education. After 1997, in accordance with Law No. 4306, these two diplomas have been combined and replaced by a single diploma, the Basic Education Diploma (*İlköğretim Diploması*), to be awarded to those students who successfully complete the eight-year basic education program. In Turkey, secondary education covers general, vocational and technical high schools (*Lise*)

In other words, this dissertation looks at education policies and the political debates with respect to the content of the religion courses first introduced in 1924, and subsequently, the subject of continuous power struggles. In this history, it is immediately apparent that the views of non-Muslims and Alevites have remained peripheral to the various debates concerning religion and education. It is my contention that tracing the historical development of the religion courses will improve our understanding of a secular state and its relation to Islam and Turkish nationalism. Historical debates about the legitimacy of compulsory religion education, conducted by the highly polarized Turkish intelligentsia, reveal the complicated relationship that a “secular” state establishes between Sunni Islam and other religions (Christianity, Judaism and Alevism).

The notion of “the Turkish state” is of course, a specious one. It is to attribute unity, morality and independence to something that can only ever be relatively disunited, amoral and dependent upon the workings of governments. However, as Abrams puts it, even if we take “state” to be an illusion, there is still a project of dominations that can be studied.⁹ In the Turkish case, there is certainly a project of domination of minorities by the hegemonic culture, and this is exactly what this dissertation explores through its detailed study of compulsory religion education.

The simple, but important reason for choosing to concentrate on education is its powerful role in shaping citizens and nations. As Kaplan puts it, “through the school system, the state acts to transmit core values that promote the basic requisites of citizenship: that is to say, children must be predisposed to accept the moral and social principles underlying the polity”.¹⁰ This is especially true in countries like Turkey, where school children are expected to assimilate national principles relevant to their lives as adult citizens, and the Turkish “father state” legitimates the authoritarian relationship of father and children.¹¹ Michel Foucault developed his conceptual work on discourse and power/knowledge in order to show us how state institutions work to marginalize alternative ways of acting and thinking.¹² Turkish schools are no different in this respect; these are spaces in which alternative ways of “being”

that provide four years of education (it was three years until 2005). Thus in the period covered in this chapter, the education consisted of two levels; primary and secondary, the secondary being divided into *orta* and the *lise* parts.

⁹ Philip Abrams, “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State”, *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1:1 (March, 1988) pp. 75-81.

¹⁰ Sam Kaplan, *Education and the Politics of National Culture in post-1980 Turkey: The Pedagogical State*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006, Preface xv.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹² Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald Bouchard. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 200.

are discouraged.

In the early republican era in Turkey, all levels of religion education were officially almost banned for nearly two decades. After the Second World War, improving socio-economic relations with Western democracies and the initiation of a multi-party system influenced the educational structure. It was in this context that religion education in schools emerged as an important issue. After a long debate at the political level, religion education was introduced not only in primary schools (in 1949), but also in lower secondary schools (*orta okul*) (in 1956), and in upper secondary schools (*lise*) (in 1967).¹³ The debate continues until today. Many scholars in Turkey believe that compulsory religion education in state schools is not consistent with the international covenant's articles on Freedom of Religion or Belief.¹⁴ In Turkey, there are certain groups that object to the course, while other groups find it inadequate to the teaching of Islam.¹⁵

Here it must be noted that prior to 1982, when the course was optional, the course was still called as a compulsory course. The reason to call it 'compulsory' was due to the fact that if a student chose to follow the course, he/she had to pass it in order to progress to the next level education. In all parliamentary debates, legislation and scholarly work, the course is described in this way. Therefore, I also describe the education in this era as compulsory; cautioning the reader that the application of the course differed from what came after 1982 when compulsory meant that there was no right to opt out of the course.

Thus, it was in 1982, that the religious character of Turkish nationalism, evident in virtually all school textbooks since the establishment of the republic, was further consolidated by the introduction of compulsory religion courses. Two years after the 1980 coup, the military endorsed a new constitution that mandated obligatory instruction in religion culture and moral education in all primary and secondary schools. Beginning at the fourth grade level and continuing until graduation from high school, all school children (with the exception of non-Muslim students who have the right to opt out of the course¹⁶), must attend the "Religion

¹³ Recep Kaymakcan. "Christianity in Turkish Religious Education." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 10.3 (1999), p. 280.

¹⁴ The reasoning of this phenomenon is best summarized in Moe's article. See: Moe, Christian. Moe, Christian. "Religious Human Rights and Religion in Schools." *Proceedings of the International Conference 'Religion in Schools: Problems of Pluralism in the Public Sphere,'* Kotor, Montenegro, 22-24 Apr. 2005. PDF file.

¹⁵ One example is the article of İhsan Yıldız . See: Yıldız, İhsan. Yıldız, İhsan. "Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi: Zorunlu mu Kalmalı, Yoksa Seçmeli mi Olmalı?" ["Religion Culture and Morals Course: Shall it be compulsory or voluntary?"]. *TÜBAV Bilim Dergisi* 2.2 (2009): 243-256.

¹⁶ This right to exemption derives directly from accepted definitions of 'minority' and 'minority rights' in Turkey. It has been based on a peace treaty signed in Lausanne on 24 July 1923, between the British Empire, France, Italy, Japan, Greece, Romania, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes on one side, and Turkey on the other. According to the provisions of the Lausanne Treaty, it is legally correct for Turkey to consider only

Culture and Morals” course [*Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi (DKAB)*], which has a confessional character.

The main characteristic of confessional religious education is its claim—whether implicitly or explicitly made—that a specific religion is the only true religion. Moreover, the religion education system is based on the Hanafi-Maturidi branch of orthodox Islam and as such, does not create space for the Alevi understanding of Islam.¹⁷ At first glance, one might claim that it is the Alevis who suffer most under this system, as they must attend the course while members of the other religious minorities are exempted. However, this is not necessarily true, as this dissertation will reveal.

There has been much scholarly research done on the nationalistic character of the Turkish education system. The works of Ismail Kaplan and Etienne Copeaux trace the Turkish education system from its inception to today, with regard to its ideological content.¹⁸ Kaplan studies the constitutions, various party and government programmes, laws, directives, and statements made by officials from the ministry of education. Copeaux focuses on Turkish history textbooks produced between 1931 and 1993. Copeaux’s work is original in the sense that he lays out a continuous, more or less latent Islamic historiography, within which various discourses such as Kemalism, Turkish Islamic Synthesis and Islamism take precedence at different times and in different books. Büşra Ersanlı-Behar’s dissertation, the introduction to Doğan Avcıoğlu’s book, *Türklerin Tarihi*, and in more elaborate form the work of İsmail Beşikçi are all studies that treat the ideological function of history textbooks.¹⁹

In addition to these works, Turkish textbooks have come under a slightly different scrutiny in recent years. In 2004, a number of institutions conducted evaluations—from a human rights perspective—of history textbooks. One such exercise, the “Human Rights in Textbooks Project”, was carried out by the History Foundation of Turkey and the Turkish

non-Muslims as minorities. This legal inference also corresponds to the general conviction in Turkey that only non-Muslims should be considered as minorities—a conviction that is determined by historical, political and ideological factors.

For more thorough information on the subject see: Oran, Baskın. *Türkiye’de Azınlıklar: Kavramlar, Teori, Lozan, İç mevzuat, İçtihat, Uygulama* [*Minorities in Turkey: Concepts, Theory, Lausanne, Legislation, Jurisprudence, Implementation*]. İstanbul: İletişim, 2004.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ The works mentioned here are: Kaplan, İsmail. *Türkiye’de Milli Eğitim İdeolojisi ve Siyasal Toplumsallaşma Üzerindeki Etkisi* [*The Ideology of National Education in Turkey and Its implications for Political Socialization*]. İstanbul: İletişim, 1999; Copeaux, Etienne. *Tarih Ders Kitaplarında (1931-1993) Türk Tarih Tezinden Türk-İslam Sentezine* [*From the Turkish History Thesis to the Turkish Islamic Synthesis in the Turkish History Textbook 1931-1993*]. Trans. Ali Berktaş. İstanbul: İletişim, 2006.

¹⁹ Büşra Ersanlı Behar. *İktidar ve Tarih. Türkiye’de “Resmî Tarih” Tezinin Oluşum, 1929-1937* [*Hegemony and History: The Formation of the “Official History” Thesis in Turkey, 1929-1937*]. İstanbul: Afa, 1992; Doğan Avcıoğlu, *Türklerin Tarihi* [*History of the Turks*]. Vol.1. İstanbul: Tekin, 1979, pp. 23-24; İsmail Beşikçi, “*Türk Tarih Tezi*”, “*Günes-Dil Teorisi*” ve *Kürt Sorunu* [*“Turkish History Thesis”, “Sun-Language Theory” and Kurdish Problem*]. Ankara: Çağlar, 1977.

Academy of Sciences. The project was part of the project for Promoting Human Rights in Textbooks, inspired by the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education. It addressed the need to assess the basic premises of the national educational system as manifested in the textbooks. In this project, 190 textbooks were analysed, covering the range of subjects taught in primary and secondary schools. This was the most extensive and systematic survey of textbooks in Turkey to date, drawing on the participation of 179 teachers, 51 parents and 91 undergraduate or graduate students. The study identified and reported four thousand cases of abuse. The findings, grouped according to subject or the nature of the abuse, were then discussed and evaluated in a series of articles published under the title “Human Rights Issues in Textbooks: The Turkish Case”.²⁰ At the end of this project, in which I was actively involved, a final report was submitted to the Ministry of Education. This report was based upon our findings, and made recommendations as to how textbooks might be improved. As the above examples illustrate, Turkish textbooks and school curricula have attracted considerable attention.

Apart from scholars who confine their attention to national and historical education in Turkey, there are also scholars who have written about various aspects of religion education in Turkish schools. Indeed religion education, especially compulsory religion education, is far from being an under-researched area. However, many scholars working on this topic tend to take a descriptive approach to historical studies. Others seek to defend the compatibility or incompatibility of compulsory religion courses with secularism that turns on unproductive theoretical debates. At best, these studies try to elaborate on whether the course can be seen as a major compromise of Kemalist secularism, or as the manifestation of state control over the religious sphere, and thus ultimate proof that Turkish secularism has not been about the separation of sacred and secular spheres. Yet a close look at the history of compulsory religion education and a scrutiny of this history from a human rights perspective seems to draw less attention from scholars, about the internal dynamics of Turkish secularism. In sum, lacking sufficient depth, many of the existing debates obscure the need to address, in practical terms, the quality of this education. In this thesis, I argue that compulsory religion education will not be fully understood unless and until we consider it in a broad socio-political context informed by human rights values.²¹

²⁰ Deniz Torba Ceylan and Gürol Irzık, eds. *Human Rights Issues in Textbooks: The Turkish Case*. Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı, 2004.

²¹ In the context of education and this particular study, I define human rights values as the promotion of the fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights specifically in regard

Beyza Bilgin, for example, was the first religious educator to achieve a professorship in religion education. She has been one of the most influential people in the move to make religion education compulsory in 1980. Her works approach the topic from a pedagogical point of view focusing on the merits of provision of religion education in formal education system.

Halis Ayhan, a scholar at Marmara University, has written a comprehensive history of religion education in Turkey. His book also covers the development of private religious education and the Imam Hatip schools (*İmam Hatip Lisesi*), which are designed to train imams for religious institutions.²² Ayhan is one of the proponents of compulsory religion education; in his various works, he argues that Turkish society needs religion education in order to prevent moral depravity.

Two articles by Nurullah Altaş, another scholar working in this field of study, have proved of great value to my research. Altaş is the only writer to provide a comprehensive *historical* treatment of the role of religion in formal education. In his article, “The place of religion in the Turkish formal education”, he studies the programmes of religion courses taught between 1924 and 1980, but in a somewhat descriptive way.²³ His later article examines the same process, but for the period between 1980 and 2001. In this second piece, he addresses the 1999 changes made to improve the textbooks.²⁴

Recep Kaymakcan has written comprehensively about various aspects of religion education, again mostly focusing on textbooks and curriculum changes. He is the only scholar to analyze the treatment of Christianity and Judaism in religion textbooks. He has also cooperated with the Education Reform Initiative, an NGO, on a project that thoroughly examined the changes made to the religion education program in 2005 by the Ministry of Education. This project which is called “Religion and Education in Turkey: The need for change”, was the first of its kind in that it brought together intellectuals, academics, educators, and members of NGOs to discuss the problems of religion education. The group produced a final paper in which they made detailed recommendations and expressed a consensus on how

to tolerance, peace, non-violence and intercultural understanding, including respect for linguistic, cultural and religious diversity.

²² Halis Ayhan, *Türkiye’de Din Eğitimi* [*Religion Education in Turkey*]. Istanbul: Dem, 2004.

²³ Nurullah Altaş, “Türkiye’de Örgün Öğretimde Dinin Yeri” [“The Place of Religion in the Turkish Formal Education System”]. *Maarife Dergisi* 1.2 (Spring 2002): 219-229.

²⁴ Nurullah Altaş, “Türkiye’de Zorunlu Din Öğretimini Yapılandırılan Süreç, Hedefler ve Yeni Yöntem Arayışları” [“The Process, Aims and the Search for New Methods that Structure Compulsory Religion Education in Turkey”]. *Dini Araştırmalar Dergisi* (Jan.-Apr. 2002): 145-168.

religion education in Turkey ought to proceed.²⁵ The specific content of this paper will be addressed in Chapter Four.

Sam Kaplan, a British scholar referred to earlier, has looked at how state policy makers, aligned with the Turkish Islamic Synthesis, have promoted a rationalist, religious version of nationalism in the curriculum. In one of his articles, he conducts a discourse analysis of a seventh-grade textbook and shows how this approach works to identify the interplay between religious heritage and secularity following the 1980 military coup.²⁶ In his book, *The Pedagogical State*, Kaplan pursues an ethnographic study of the cultural and political processes by which education is reconfigured around the interests of different sectors of contemporary Turkish society.²⁷ However, the focus in his book is primarily the Turkish education system as a whole, rather than compulsory religion education.

There have been no ethnographic studies of how minorities have viewed their exemption from the course, and how this exemption may have contributed to their marginalization. More specifically, there is a lack of scholarly attention paid to the relationship between the compulsory religion courses and the relative impact on religious minorities included in the course (Alevites) and those exempted from it (Jews, Christians and Assyrians). One exception may be found in the work of Yahya Koçoğlu who has conducted interviews with 46 non-Muslim people under the age of 35, and compiled them in a book.²⁸ The interviews address perceptions and problems concerning identity, as experienced by individuals of Jewish and Christian origins. A few of these interviewees provide brief accounts of their experiences in compulsory religion courses. They were rather interesting and made me think about the importance of examining this issue in a more elaborate comprehensive way.

My research differs from the abovementioned works because it filters all socio-political developments with regards to religion education (from the late Ottoman era to modern Turkey) through the lens of religious minorities. Chapter six is innovative in its use of interviews with people from religious minority groups reflecting on their experiences of school and the compulsory religion courses. I aim to give voice to the religious minorities on this issue, precisely because until now, their voices have been largely ignored. In this respect, my research takes inspiration from the field of Subaltern Studies and/or minority histories, as

²⁵ “Religion and Schooling in Turkey: The Need for Reform.” *Education Reform Initiative*. Mar. 2005. PDF file.

²⁶ The article referred is: Sam Kaplan, “Religious Nationalism”: A Textbook Case from Turkey, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 25 No.3, 2005.

²⁷ See: Kaplan, Sam. *Education and the Politics of National Culture in post-1980 Turkey: The Pedagogical State*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006.

²⁸ Yahya Koçoğlu, *Azınlık Gençleri Anlatıyor [Minority Youth is Telling]*. Istanbul: Metis, 2001.

explained by Chakrabarty in his highly influential book.²⁹ Subaltern theory takes the perspective of the “other” as the one who has had no voice because of race, class or gender. It emphasizes that norms are established by those in power and imposed on subjugated groups. By attending to previously excluded voices and experience, Subaltern Studies seek to make the subaltern the sovereign subject of history.³⁰

Working in the same spirit, which animates the studies described above, I aim to show the complex ways in which religious minorities have been ‘othered’ by classroom experience, and how that experience may have shaped the larger meaning of citizenship in Turkey. Moreover, I seek to move beyond historical studies that are largely descriptive, in order to analyze the internal dynamics of the developments in religion education. Finally, my approach should add to our critical understanding of the specific character of Turkish secularism.

Here I would like to note that since I confine my attention to an excavation of official state discourse in relation to religious minorities, I risk giving the impression that the religion course was put in to the curricula *only* to assimilate religious minorities and that the Islam presented in the textbooks had the consent of all Muslims, including every sect, denomination, *tarikats/cemaats* etc. I am well aware that this is not the case and that there is widespread resentment about the official version of Islam. This resentment emanates from various groups, some of which argue that the course was intended to silence alternative, and sometimes more fanatic versions of Islam. Although I acknowledge this important dimension of the course which has repercussions for Muslims in Turkey, I leave it outside of my scope.

Together with the Introduction (Chapter one) and Conclusion (Chapter seven), this dissertation is organized in seven chapters. **Chapter two**, titled “*Religious education during the Late Ottoman Period: Historical Background*”³¹, surveys the historical development of Ottoman education policies from the early Tanzimat era to the end of the Empire. In addition, this history is considered in relation to historically changing notions of citizenship. My key concern in this dissertation is compulsory religion education and its consequences for religious minorities. However, this chapter treats the larger dynamics behind the formation of the modern Turkish educational system, in which compulsory religion education would play such an important role. It is my conviction that Turkey’s modern education policies have been informed by the continuities, as well as the discrepancies, between the policies adopted by

²⁹ See: Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000.

³⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000, p. 102.

³¹ In this chapter I use the term “religious education” instead of “religion education” as during most of this period what was understood from education was religious in essence.

Tanzimat reformers, Abdülhamid, and the Young Turk regime. In this section, I also explain how religious education was conducted in these three historical periods, touching briefly on the question of how religious minorities received religious education in their *millet*s.

In **Chapter three**, “*Education policies with respect to religion education (1918-1980)*”, I trace the history of formal education policies in Turkey with respect to religion education from 1918 to 1980. The chapter is divided into three main sections: 1918-1923, 1923-1950 and finally 1950-1980. This endeavor opens up a space to question the compatibility of the principle of secularism (as declared in the Turkish Constitution) with the existence of state-initiated religion courses in schools. Here, the focus is on members of religious minorities, namely Jews, Greeks, Armenians and Alevis, who have experienced state education policies rather differently than the Sunni Muslims. As has already been shown, the members of these religious groups remained at the margins of discussions regarding the quality of the religion education. In this chapter, I analyze various materials, including textbooks, speeches by education ministers, government programs, legal documents and finally, scholarly debates about compulsory religion education.

A crucial source for this chapter is the Communications Journal (*Tebliğler Dergisi*), which is a biweekly journal that has reported all Ministry of Education decisions since 1939. The journal provides a wide range of information about national education conferences, ministers’ speeches, and details of the organization of various school programs. In addition I used the school textbooks that were given approval by the Ministry of Education.

Throughout Turkish history, there have been numerous governmental debates about the legitimacy of this course. I will critically examine these debates, particularly where they touch on the in/compatibility of the religion course with human rights and the secular state. The debates yield a great deal of information about the positions held by particular parties in relation to these questions. Here, my main resource will be the reports of Council of Ministry of Education (*Milli Eğitim Şuurası*), which started in 1921 and continue today. Some of these reports contain dialogues between ministers that touch specifically on the issue of religion education.

Chapter four, “*Education policies with respect to religion education (1980-2009)*”, develops the work of the previous chapter, by tracing the history of religion education between 1980 and 2009. The first section treats the 1980 *coup d’état* and the military regime, under which religion education courses became compulsory. I explain the current application of the course and look at recent challenges relating to the European accession process and legislative changes in the realm of human rights. These wider developments have important

implications for the structure of religion education in Turkey. In this chapter, I begin to identify and analyze these implications. Here I rely heavily on newspaper articles, all of which have been critically examined and crosschecked with other journals, as well as EU Commission reports.

In **Chapter five**, *Religion textbooks*, I take a close look at the textbooks that have been used for the religion education courses. As the basis for instruction and a frame for classroom discourse, textbooks have undoubted importance. This is especially true for religion textbooks insofar as they leave little semantic space to question privileged representations. The simple and straightforward language, clear-cut definitions, and unambiguous narratives tend to confine interpretations to a predetermined field of associations. In this chapter, I inspect the various textbooks in historical context. Specifically my selection and analysis of the books follow the time periods set out in the preceding chapters. Drawing on the methods of critical discourse analysis, I provide an account of the intricate relationships between discourse, ideology, society and culture. This approach works to reveal the implicit arguments and meanings in the texts (textbooks), which tend to marginalize non-dominant groups (the Alevi and non-Muslims), while justifying the values, beliefs, and ideologies of dominant groups (the Sunnis).

In **Chapter six**, *“Listening to the voice of religious minorities”*, I turn more directly to Turkey’s religious minorities and their experiences of religion education. The open-ended and semi-structured interviews conducted with members of various minority groups form the backbone of this chapter. In these interviews, I heard accounts concerning the character of compulsory religion education in Turkey, as well as specific experiences of discrimination. The interviews hint at the possible relation between the increase in religious hate crimes and the quality of religion education in Turkey. In addition, there are intriguing accounts of how some individuals and groups resist and negotiate compulsory religion education. For this chapter, I conducted in-depth interviews with 16 people of Armenian, Jewish, Orthodox Christian and Alevi origins, posing semi-structured questions. The findings from these interviews have been arranged and analyzed thematically.

Compulsory religion education remains a highly controversial topic in Turkey, subject to change at any time. As of October 2010, there are new plans to modify the content of the course, taking it in the direction of a “morality course” that addresses all students, but with an additional plan to offer elective courses on “Sunnism”. This idea has been proposed before and I briefly discuss the issue elsewhere in the dissertation. However, what is new here is the recent declaration by Minister of State, Faruk Çelik, that if Alevi demand a similar course to

teach “Alevism”, this should also be offered.³² To date, this new plan is still in its infancy and its adoption has not been confirmed. That said, Faruk Çelik’s statement, however vague, does signal the start of another momentous process in the history of compulsory religion education courses in Turkey. In light of these recent developments, it seems that my thesis arrives at a timely moment. It is important therefore, to remind the reader that the dissertation covers events up through the end of 2009.

1.1 A note on the term ‘secular’

The terms ‘secular’, ‘secularization’ and ‘secularism’ come up frequently in this dissertation, especially in chapters two and three. The usage of these terms in different historical contexts (i.e. the late Ottoman era and Republican Turkey) demands some explanation.

In his influential book *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Casanova argues that in reference to actual historical process, the term ‘secularization’ was first used to signify the massive expropriation and appropriation, usually by the state, of monasteries, landholdings, and the mortmain wealth of the church, after the Protestant Reformation and the ensuing religious wars.³³ It is after this point, he asserts, that “secularization has come to designate the passage, transfer, or relocation of persons, things, functions, meanings, and so forth, from their traditional location in the religious sphere to the secular spheres.”³⁴ Thus typically, the term is used to refer to the concept of the secular state, where government and religious institutions are separated and the state's authority derives from man-made laws, rather than religious doctrine.

The classical sociological theory (as found in the works on Durkheim and Weber), depicts secularization is an essential component of the process of modernization. According to this approach, which is called the “secularization thesis” or the “secularization paradigm”, religious beliefs either disappear, decline, become privatized or marginalized along with the increasing differentiation of religious and non-religious institutions.³⁵ Needless to say, the phenomena of privatization and marginalization that Casanova discusses were not evident in the late Ottoman context. I would argue that the term secularization must be used advisedly in

³² Sedat Ergin. “Hükümetin Zorunlu Din Dersi Sınavı” [“The test of the government with the compulsory religion education”]. *Hürriyet Gazetesi* 28 Nov. 2010.

³³ Jose Casanova, *Public Religions In the Modern World*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994, p. 13.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ For more information on the secularization theory, see: Wilson, Bryan. *Contemporary Transformations of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976; Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Doubleday, 1967. For an account of the ‘secularisation thesis’ see: Casanova, Jose. *Public Religions In the Modern World*, Univ.of Chicago Press: Chicago, USA, 1994:15-20.

relation to the late Ottoman period, where the Sultan was also the khalif and the ideology of Empire was based on religion. In this particular historical context, I use the term secularization to refer to the decreasing importance of religion in civic society, such as the field of law and, specifically, in public education. The introduction of modern schools and educational institutions came as a result of social and political processes which effectively challenged the sole dependence on religion in educational theory and practice. When understood in this way, it can be said that it was not until *after* the Tanzimat era that secularization became one of the key components of education policy.³⁶ The need for Ottomans with a knowledge of Europe, of European science and technology was felt urgently when the Mahmudian reforms were taking effect. Moreover, in the realm of education, the need to monitor and centralize the existing *millet* schools provided an important motivation for further secularization.

According to Fortna, the term “secular” cannot be applied to schools in this context, since these schools were ostensibly interdenominational and included some scope for religion; they had their own mosques, observed the Muslim calendar, taught Koranic interpretation and emphasized Islamic notions of morality.³⁷ A good example of Fortna’s point may be found in the daily practices in *Galatasaray Mekteb-i Sultani*, the first established *sultani*³⁸ intended to provide education for both Muslim and non-Muslim pupils, and often regarded as the epitome of Ottomanism. In *Galatasaray Mekteb-i Sultani*, during prayer times, Muslim students were encouraged to go to mosques and non-Muslim students to various shrines where they could practice their religion. This reveals some of the early limits to secularization in the Ottoman context.

In the modern Turkish context the terms secular and secularism connote completely different concepts from the ones usually in Western Europe and the USA. In order to give meaning to secularization processes in Turkey, especially with regards to education, it is

³⁶ The Tanzimat, meaning reorganization of the Ottoman Empire, was a period of reformation that began in 1839 and ended with the First Constitutional Era in 1876. On November 3rd 1839, Sultan Abdulmecid issued a statute for the general government of the Empire. Originally called Hatti-i Serif of Gülhane (the imperial garden where it was first proclaimed), the statute became known as the Tanzimat decree. The decree was actually designed during the reign of Mahmud II (1784-1839) but, due to his death, it was during his son's reign that the decree was proclaimed by the minister of foreign affairs, Mustafa Reşit Pasha.

³⁷ Benjamin C. Fortna, “Islamic Morality in Late Ottoman ‘Secular’ Schools.” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 32 (2000), p. 369.

³⁸ *Sultani* (School of the Sultan) means lycee level institutions, the cost of building and maintaining which was paid for entirely from the sultan’s personal funds. *Sultanis* charged for tuition fee so that only the wealthier families could afford to send their children, except for the very best poor students, who could attend without charge. (Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey, Volume II*, Cambridge Univ. Press: New York, 1977, p. 108) In addition, *Sultanis* aimed to foster mixed education, Muslim and non-Muslims together.

important to give the term a specifically Turkish context. Informed by the above-mentioned, ‘secularization thesis’, in the West, secularism usually means that the state remains impartial in religious matters. Therefore, a commonly held definition of secularism is the separation of church and state. Yet recent accounts of secularism in Turkey argue that the Turkish state did not follow Jefferson’s model of separation of church and state, but rather Rousseau’s or Hobbes’s model of laicism, or state control over religion. It is for this reason that some scholars believe that ‘secularism’ may not be the best word to define this phenomenon in Turkey. For instance, according to Davison, the founding and operative institutional matrix is best understood as a form of ‘laicism’ and not secularism, because secularism carries the meaning of divorcing religion and politics, and this divorce has not occurred in Turkey.³⁹ Tank chooses to call the Turkish Republic a state of ‘controlled secularity’ because she notes that in Turkey, the prevailing idea is that religion should remain in the public controlled sphere of the state, rather than the private sphere of the individual. In this respect, the Turkish approach to secularity advocates the management and control of private religion.⁴⁰ Toprak, on the other hand, refers to the Turkish Republic as a ‘semi-secular’ state, arguing that religious organization within the state bureaucracy (and the consequent subordination of religious authority to the political) is contrary to the spirit of secularism as understood in the West.⁴¹

Thus, although I accept these recent scholarly interpretations, I have opted to retain the term secular—which I believe can be adapted to specific meanings in different political and historical contexts—when analyzing the official doctrine of republican Turkey. Treated advisedly then, in this dissertation Turkish secularism is regarded as a political doctrine that promotes secularization and ultimately aims to limit religion to the private sphere by redefining it as a matter of individual conscience.

³⁹ Andrew Davison, “Turkey, a Secular Sate? The Challenge of Description.” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102.2/3 (Spring/Summer 2003), p. 342.

⁴⁰ Pinar Tank, “Political Islam in Turkey: A State of Controlled Secularity.” *Turkish Studies* 6.1 (Mar. 2005), p.14.

⁴¹ Binnaz Toprak, *Islam and Political Development in Turkey*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981, p. 47.